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So you want to be a systems leader?

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ABSTRACT

Systems leaders are trusted actors who help many people to collaborate to address wicked policy problems. These policy problems resist simple solutions by a few powerful actors in one center of government. Therefore, we need systems leaders to inspire and empower many other actors to produce more transformative change. Academic research on systems thinking is thriving, and we know a lot about the new forms of leadership that it helps to inspire. This article summarizes the practical advice to emerge from that research and offers insights on how to support and engage in systems leadership. It involves (1) making the argument for new leadership, and the value of requirements such as collaboration and boundary spanning, (2) attributes such as humility and compassion, (3) flexible mindsets and awareness of the big picture, and (4) skills such as brokerage and conflict resolution. These systems leadership traits can be developed in training. They work best in a supportive environment with sufficient political support and a culture of meaningful commitment to collective action.

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Introduction

The deep changes necessary to accelerate progress against society's most intractable problems require, a unique type of leader—the system leader, a person who catalyzes collective leadership. (Senge, Hamilton, and Kania 2015, 27)

“Systems leadership” combines two key arguments. First, to address complex policy problems, we should challenge approaches that valorize charismatic and powerful top-down leaders, in favor of harnessing the energy and skills of many essential policy actors spread across a policymaking system. Second, we need to use complexity theory and systems thinking to understand how new forms of distributed and collaborative leadership relate to the complex policy problems and policymaking systems that all policy actors need to navigate.

Many scholars and practitioners have sought to understand what systems leadership entails, and how to translate such insights into practical support and training. Our comprehensive systematic review of the academic and grey literatures identifies many diverse perspectives on new forms of leadership and understandings of systems thinking (Cairney and Toomey 2025a). This range of understandings has contributed to some confusion about how to use systems thinking for leadership training, and if alternative approaches would be more useful to practitioners (Cairney and Toomey 2025b; Needham, Gale, and Waring 2025). Yet, the broad ideas on leadership and systems thinking clearly have traction and value. In that context, we aim to overcome this confusion to produce one coherent story of practical lessons to emerge from this approach. To that end, we aim to emulate Mintrom's (2019) skillful distillation of advice in “So you want to be a policy entrepreneur?”. While practical advice for systems leadership may differ markedly from advice for budding policy entrepreneurs, this style of exposition aids systematic comparison of the kinds of advice that policy actors receive. Therefore, we present a stylized—and rather aspirational—account of leadership advice then reflect on the results.

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Our story of systems leadership identifies the following elements: (1) why new forms of leadership are essential, and what we require leadership to perform and achieve, and the (2) attributes to nurture, (3) mindsets to encourage, and (4) skills to learn (Figure 1). These elements of systems leadership can be supported by policymaking organizations and across systems, and many skills and strategies can be developed in training. A supportive political environment and policymaking culture, to boost systems leadership capacity and impact, will address an urgent need to shift from outmoded conceptions of the savior leader at the heart of government organizations toward meaningful collective action and systems change. Such a shift requires would-be systems leaders to build trust among those they seek to work with and influence.

Hence, systems leaders reveal themselves through their attempts to cross boundaries and foster system-wide collaboration and policy change. Many profiles of high-level and elected systems leaders can be found, such as when Senge, Hamilton, and Kania (2015, 27) describe the late Nelson Mandela as a “system leader, someone able to bring forth collective leadership.” However, systems leaders can just as often be found in low-profile and unelected positions, supporting the work of many others. This story is not of a few heroic or well-placed individuals. Indeed, systems leadership scholars challenge narratives of “special” and charismatic individuals in favor of more distributed and collective action (Senge, 1990, 340). They emphasize systems leadership to emphasize the mindsets, attributes, and skills that can be developed and shared among many people within a complex system.

These studies emphasize the endurance of “wicked” policy problems that defy simple small-scale solutions created by governing centers, then a pressing need to think bigger and support collective action across entire policymaking systems, from the international to the local (Auld et al. 2021; Head 2022; Rittel and Webber 1973). This need is great and urgent, to shift toward sustainable and fair solutions to address issues including climate change and global health, and transform energy, food, transport, health, housing, and many other systems that transcend traditional boundaries between policy sectors, government jurisdictions, and public and private action.

1. Systems leadership benefits and requirements

Our story begins with the profound potential benefits of systems leadership, including a more *effective* means to address policy problems, and *efficient* form of governance, while *engaging* widely with stakeholders and citizens, to produce more *equitable* policy solutions and processes (as described by Bolden 2020, 2). New leadership is *necessary*, to address wicked problems that transcend traditional boundaries:

Systems Leadership describes the way people need to behave when they face large, complex and seemingly intractable problems; where they need to juggle multiple uncertainties; where no one person or organisation can find the solution on their own; where everyone is grappling with how to make resources meet growing demand; and where the way forward lies in involving as many people’s energies, ideas, talents and expertise as possible. (Edmonstone 2020: 357; The Leadership Centre 2015, 1).

Requirements	Attributes	Mindsets	Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shift in focus • Collaboration • Boundary spanning • Systems thinking • Capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humility • Self-awareness • Reflection • Empathy • Compassion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big picture • Open-minded • Collaborative • Agile • Open to learning • Moral purpose • Ambitious and realistic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegation • Enabling • Facilitation • Brokerage • Orchestration • Evaluation • Conflict resolution • Political

Figure 1. Key elements of systems leadership.

This approach to leadership is also *good*, to foster more deliberative and participatory forms of democracy. For example, Senge, Hamilton, and Kania (2015, 28) describe the ability of systems leaders to overcome previous conflicts and stalemates: they inspire commitment, open-mindedness, and trust, which empowers more people to collaborate. Further Ghate, Lewis, and Welbourn (2013, 9) describe the practical and normative value of systems leadership to address modern political reality:

‘single agencies can no longer respond effectively to wicked issues unless they work collectively and across the system. Single agencies have neither the budget nor the human resources to respond to the current level of expectation and demand; nor do they have sufficient know-how for solving complex multi-dimensional problems unless they pool information and skills with others. This ... is consistent with the now substantial evidence about what service users (and especially those with greatest needs) want and need from public services, which is not usually a ‘single service response’ ... but a joined up, multi-dimensional response to a series of interlocking issues.’

This story of systems leadership usually begins with the need to transition from a traditional and outmoded reliance on heroic leaders of hierarchies toward collective leadership (Bolden, Gulati, and Edwards 2020, 26). This shift in thinking reflects a broad trend in research and practice to treat collaborative mindsets and relational skills as essential to organizations, policy, and democracy, and not to be described too pejoratively as “soft skills” (Ansell and Gash 2012; Bolden 2011; Ghate, Lewis, and Welbourn 2013; Spillane 2006; Van Dierendonck 2011). From this field, we can identify lists of actions or aims to avoid, such as commanding, prescribing, or competing, and those to seek, including inspiring, engaging in dialogue, co-producing, and consensus seeking (e.g. Dickson 2009; Drath et al. 2008; Edmonstone 2020).

The added element of *systems* leadership is to connect relational and collaborative leadership to the dynamics of complex systems in relation to policy and policymaking (as well as the wider study of public and private organizations). First, organizational leadership studies suggest that top-down business models may have been suited to “physical production” but not a “knowledge-oriented economy” or in “knowledge-producing organizations” where the aim is to nurture “creativity, learning, and adaptability” in contexts where outcomes emerge in the absence of hierarchy or control (Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey 2007, 298–299). Further, the shorthand VUCA—“volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous”—sums up the environment in which they operate and need to adapt (Mintrom and O’Connor, 2024; Cairney and Toomey 2025a, 11).

Second, these studies emphasize two aspects of wicked policy problems: they resist simple solutions by one center of authority, and there is unresolved contestation between the large number of policy actors who are essential to defining problems and identifying feasible solutions (Talley and Hull 2023, 1040; Ghate, Lewis, and Welbourn 2013a, 5). Such wicked problems require routine and widespread collaboration to foster greater agreement among the many actors who share policymaking responsibilities.

Third, a subset of studies draw on the complexity theory lexicon to describe the need to adapt to the dynamics of complex policymaking systems. Albeit in different ways, these accounts explore the emergence of policy change in the absence of central control, and interdependence between many actors, in a system that can dampen or amplify energy, exhibit path dependence, and produce long periods of routine behavior then bursts of instability (Cairney 2012, 348; Jackson 2024; Nel and Taeihagh 2024). These accounts connect to a wider body of public policy and administration research that narrates a partial shift in government focus. They describe and critique an old New Public Management language of central control, hierarchy, tight performance management, and clear accountability. A newer language emphasizes the need to foster and account for shared responsibilities across government departments, levels of government, and with groups and citizens outside of government (Bolden, Gulati, and Edwards 2020, 27; Edmonstone 2020, 357; Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001, 396; Onyx and Leonard 2011, 496; Osborne 2006; Ospina 2017, 276–277).

A key part of this push for a shift in research and government is to emphasize new requirements for leadership, including:

Collaboration

The aim is to augment or replace hierarchy with collaboration, to nurture a shared vision and build coalitions (Dreier, Nabarro, and Nelson 2019, 4; Edmonstone 2020, 357). One driver is practicality:

the interdependence between many essential organizations and actors, who are unable to exert control over each other, necessitates collaborative approaches to collective action. The other driver is democracy: working with policy actors across and inside/outside of government fosters wider “ownership” and legitimacy for policy change (which we explore in a systematic review of “collaborative policy-making”—Cairney and Toomey 2024).

Boundary spanning

Collaboration requires actors to cross boundaries, such as formalized boundaries between government departments, levels of government, public service organizations, or inside/outside government, and the informal or cultural boundaries between professions or competing coalitions (O’Flynn 2013). Actors seek to span boundaries to: address problems that transcend traditional sectoral or jurisdictional purviews, coordinate objectives and actions, pool resources toward a common goal, and seek “synergies” or reduce the costs of fragmentation (2013, 13–23).

Systems thinking

Collaboration across boundaries requires new perspectives and ways of thinking, to seek to understand the underlying causes of wicked problems and unpredictable dynamics of systems (Carey et al. 2015; Talley and Hull 2023, 1041). First, some seek to visualize a policy problem as a complex system, to identify its wider determinants or root causes rather than treating immediate symptoms. For example, Rutter et al. (2017) outline a “complex systems model of evidence for public health”. Second, the “policy mix” may also exhibit features of a complex system, when many instruments are produced by different venues for different purposes, combining to produce outcomes that emerge in the absence of any one venue’s control (e.g. Rayner and Howlett 2009 on energy and environmental policy mixes; Spyridaki and Flamos 2014). Third, systems approaches to policymaking often treat the policy process as a system in which there is no single center of control, and the fundamental task is to understand who needs to cooperate and how (see Cairney 2024 on these three approaches to complex systems).

For example, Arnold and Wade (2017, 3–6) describe, “a complete set of systems thinking skills” including to:

- “explore multiple perspectives ... some of which might conflict with the thinker’s view”
- “consider the wholes and parts,” keeping an eye on the “forest” and “trees”
- “effectively respond to uncertainty and ambiguity,” being comfortable making decisions with limited information
- Allow “time for the complexity of a situation to sink in” rather than jump to conclusions
- Develop simple but effective mental models of complex systems
- Recognize a system, including its properties and boundaries
- Identify and characterize essential relationships
- Recognize and understand “feedback loops”
- Understand “past system behavior” to help “predict future behavior” but be responsive to “changes over time.”

Capacity

A shift from top-down to distributed responsibility requires a major boost to leadership capacity, such as via substantive government support for new ways of working, and continuous training and professional development to nurture key attributes, support a shift in mindsets, and equip many people with systems leadership skills.

This overall narrative contributes to an image of continuous or cyclical activity (Figure 2). While wicked policy problems may necessitate collaboration across systems, complex policymaking systems

defy our full understanding and control and are not so amenable to new action. The political reality is that the old ways of working—including hierarchical approaches to policymaking - often have more traction than proposed reforms (Cairney and Toomey 2025a, 21). Further, the need to span boundaries is clear, but do not underestimate their endurance (O’Flynn 2013, 13; see also Cejudo and Trein 2023). When dominant ideas and policy processes favor well-established hierarchies, potential systems leaders may see few incentives to engage in the more open-ended, risky, and less visible work of boundary spanning and building capacity to drive systems change.

Therefore, for its advocates, the reasons to engage in systems leadership are also the reasons for limited progress (and vice versa). This dilemma prompts the need to develop not only the following mindsets and skills associated with systems leadership, but also the “tenacity” associated with policy entrepreneurs:

‘Tenacity is the willingness to keep working towards a bigger goal, even when that goal seems nowhere in sight. This quality is important because policy entrepreneurs typically operate in contexts that are highly complex and where the chances of achieving success can seem slim’ (Mintrom 2019, 311).

2. The systems leadership attributes to nurture

The following list of attributes, mindsets, and skills are connected: actors who have developed certain *attributes* (e.g. self-awareness) and *mindsets* (e.g. thinking collaboratively) may be well placed to develop tailored *skills* (e.g. facilitation) during training, to boost capacity for *strategy* development (e.g. to co-produce a new vision for policy and collaboration) (Mintrom 2019, 308).

Mintrom (2019, 309–310) describes an entrepreneur’s attributes as “inherent capabilities,” such as “social acuity, credibility, sociability, and tenacity,” that are beneficial but not “readily acquired.” Systems leadership studies place similar emphasis on beneficial attributes, but perhaps with greater hope that their identification and encouragement can prompt organizations to invest in the people who possess them and the environment to support the benefits of such attributes. Often this means giving proper respect to “soft skills” and the people who possess them. Systems leadership may require some combination of three attributes:

2.1. Humility

Focus less on yourself, more on the perspectives and values of others, encourage many actors to see value in each other’s contributions, and share the credit (Timmins 2015, 18). See yourself as a “shepherd” or “steward” to facilitate collective action (Ansell and Gash (2012, 2; Enderton, Bregendahl, and Topaloff 2017).

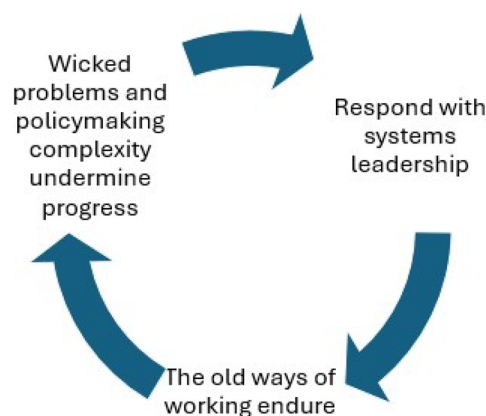


Figure 2. The systems leadership loop (Cairney and Toomey 2025a, 21).

2.2. Self-awareness and reflection

Reflect on how you communicate with partners and avoid giving sermons as if you are all-knowing and in charge (Haynes et al. 2020). Think continuously about this process and be open to learning and improvement from feedback (Fawkes 2013, 23).

2.3. Empathy and compassion

Seek to understand what others are going through and can offer, backed by a supportive environment in which everyone can be heard (Koopmans et al. 2022, 8; West et al. 2017, 2).

Overall, there is a clear contrast with the attributes associated with the traditional top-down, hierarchy-climbing leader: charisma, self-confidence, aloofness, and credit-claiming (Cairney and Toomey 2025a, 17). For example, “humanistic leadership” encourages more “authentic leaders”:

‘who are astute, empathic and possess cogent insight into human behaviours. Such leaders build relational and social capital upon which cogent collaboration is forged. Ethical behaviour, honesty and integrity are of paramount importance. Caring and compassionate leadership must prevail as an inspiration to all ... Courage and equanimity are also essential qualities ... Finally, humanistic leaders constantly challenge the status quo and strive for transformational changes in the best interests of the public’ (Caro 2016, 126).

3. The systems leadership mindsets to encourage

Mindsets sit somewhere between attributes and skills, as elements that may be internalized but can also be taught to some extent. For example, mindset could be connected to Mintrom’s (2019, 312) skill of “strategic thinking,” which includes identifying a goal and the actions and resources necessary to achieve it, then adapting to situations that are more-or-less conducive to progress. However, a systems leadership focus on mindset also emphasizes new ways of thinking about strategy, to prioritize the collective processes required for strategic thinking in a complex system out of any actor’s direct influence. Essential mindsets include:

3.1. Big picture

Seeing-the-big-picture relates partly to relational approaches and vision: attend to the need to cooperate with many other actors, which requires you to understand the same problem from “multiple perspectives,” or at least respect the perspectives offered by partners (Nguyen et al. 2023, 7). This mindset helps to facilitate cooperation toward a “compelling vision which is shared by all partners in the whole system” (Welbourn et al. 2012, 21). All going well, this “big picture” becomes clear over time, emerging from many conversations, where leaders listen, encourage discussion, and help guide the construction of a vision that is viewed as compelling and widely-shared (e.g. Weick 1995).

“Big picture” also relates to the idea of zooming out from individual interactions to see a whole system in different ways. For example, Jackson (2024, 212) outlines methods to guide big picture thinking, such as during an exploration phase to see a situation from five “systemic perspectives”:

1. “Mechanical” to identify a clear a goal and ask which parts of a system will help you to achieve it.
2. “Interrelationships” to anticipate systems dynamics, such as the “feedback loops” that may arise from interactions.
3. “Organismic,” to identify the equivalent of a “brain,” able to learn from the interaction between many semi-autonomous elements of a system.
4. “Purposeful,” to attend to the social and political issues that arise whenever actors present different perceptions or worldviews.
5. “Societal/environmental,” to support a participatory and deliberative democratic process, ensuring that all voices are heard, and asking challenging questions, such as if current or proposed policies are sustainable and who would benefit most from the most likely outcomes (2024, 92–100).

3.2. Open-minded and collaborative

A collaborative mindset links strongly to a commitment to open-minded discussion. It can relate to individual characteristics such as a willingness to listen to others, and the flexibility to adapt to each social situation as it emerges. It can also signal a contribution to a wider system of engagement on an equal footing, such as to challenge the unequal power dynamics that can limit frank and challenging discussion. This combination is essential to innovation via creativity and equal participation in co-productive processes (Dreier, Nabarro, and Nelson 2019, 35; Jang, Valero, and Jung 2016, 90).

3.3. Agile and open to learning

Be open to continuous learning and reflection in a systemic context characterized by high uncertainty and often unpredictable outcomes, as well as limited control over key processes. For example, trial-and-error learning aids the continuous updating of knowledge and skills, while flexibility may extend to adapting to different ways of working in each context (Begg 2020, 10; Beharrell et al. 2021, 94). Adaptability is key when actors find themselves in many different situations where people think differently about the same problem and organize collective action according to different rules (Bolden et al. 2023, 340).

3.4. Moral purpose

Elements of a moral purpose include a broad commitment to democratic and participatory ways of working, to see actors as colleagues rather than followers (much like many similar approaches to leadership, including Swanwick and McKimm 2011, 24 on “servant leadership”). This commitment to collaboration allows a wide group of actors to cooperate to produce a vision that contains a “clear moral purpose” and allows a large network of actors to measure progress in terms of the big picture rather than relying solely on narrow and short-term performance measures. For example, Education Scotland (2019) emphasizes the importance of a vision for long-term change toward more equitable inputs and outcomes, in the context of routine short-term pressures to improve exam attainment.

3.5. Ambitious and realistic

Systems leaders need tenacity and resilience to relate ambitious long-term aims to limited short-term progress. If this approach to policy and policymaking is truly new, it inevitably rubs up against the more established and routine ways of doing things, requiring continuous effort to influence policy-making rules or cultures and equip and prepare people for systems change. For example, Gupta, Sherif, and Zhu (2022, 529–536) describe the need to identify many patient and open-minded leaders able to work consistently and develop relationships—with school leaders, teachers, parents, and students—to foster collaboration toward systems change in education, while reflecting on the immense scale of the task and a periodic sense of taking one step forwards and two steps back.

4. The systems leadership skills to learn

Systems-focused training seeks to build on new approaches to leadership, and new ways of thinking about policy problems and processes, to develop essential collaborative skills among a large profession, including actors in or not in formal positions of power.

4.1. Delegation

This process may begin with a shift from hierarchical mindsets to recognizing that meaningful delegation will give many actors the space to be creative and collaborative while contributing to shared responsibilities. This skill involves creating the conditions for people to thrive, which requires actors

in formal positions of authority to produce and communicate clear aims (connected to the big picture or vision), and to balance the encouragement of risk taking with the need to avoid “anarchy” (Senge and Sterman 1992).

4.2. Enabling and facilitation

Enabling skills harness attributes of humility and empathy, a mindset that values multiple perspectives (Atkinson et al. 2015, 11–13). The initial benefit of facilitation skills is to enable people to produce a “shared sense of commitment” to work together and address a major problem, change how things are done around here, and maintain high-level political commitment to that systems change process. This high-level cooperation establishes the enabling conditions for many more actors (usually in less senior positions) to be creative and take some risks in the name of the wider collaboration (Bolden, Gulati, and Edwards 2020, 26–33). In other words, actors need to trust that the process (and its key enablers) will reward their innovation or—at least—not punish proportionate risk-taking.

4.3. Brokerage and orchestration

Brokerage connects to the need for boundary spanning, to connect many actors situated in different parts of a system and give them the opportunity and language to share ideas. One aim may be to encourage some debate on ideas to prompt productive tension and innovation before seeking agreement on new ways of working (Lichtenstein et al. 2006, 5–6; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017, 17).

Two versions of “orchestration” may be valuable in different contexts: a relatively top-down approach to establish initial aims and assign roles, and a more bottom-up “consensus-based” approach to allow some actors to specialize and operate informally in sub-groups (Reypens, Lievens, and Blazevic 2021, 79).

4.4. Evaluation and making the case for change

Not everyone is enthused with the idea of systems leadership, or willing to make such a leap of faith toward new ways of working (Jang, Valero, and Jung 2016, 90). Some pay it lip service without giving substantive support. Some feel threatened by this distribution of power at their expense. Others may be skeptical about its value, especially in political systems with established means to make policy, debate success, and hold to account the actors in formal positions of authority. In that context, evaluation skills connect to *making the case* for the potential and actual success of systems leadership.

For example, a focus on relatively intangible process-based measures of success—such as stakeholder buy-in - is hard to connect to established performance measures and a demand for “hard” evidence of progress (Bigland et al. 2020, 11; Nguyen et al. 2023, 8). Therefore, the skill is to reframe such performance measures to make them more consistent with the idea of systems change, rally enough support for this new way of thinking, and provide an “evidence base” often built on testimonials and case studies of progress (Begg 2020, 14; Timmins 2015, 13–17). Here, the hope is to create a virtuous cycle: initial task clarification and support allows actors to produce quick wins and enough evidence to make the case to continue in the face of inevitable “growing pains” when actors engage in new relationships and ways of working (The Institute for Educational Leadership 2014, 1–5).

4.5. Conflict resolution and political skills

It would be naïve to think that skillful enablers and brokers would be able to facilitate consensus across a policymaking system. Rather, conflict may be inevitable when new ideas or agendas threaten the established status and routines of powerful people and organizations (Barkell and Snyder 2021, 8). Further, part of the driver for new ways of thinking is that conflict often reflects the dominance of one way of thinking over most others, such as when public health research bemoans the individualist

approach to health taken by most governments and encourages tenacity and patience during periods of ineffective policymaking (Evans et al. 2021, 27; Hunter 2009, 203).

In such cases, political skills are essential. For example, Mintrom's (2019, 311–314) list of policy entrepreneur skills include the ability to form coalitions and engage in networks, make persuasive arguments, tailor engagement to each audience, and spot opportunities for feasible negotiation. Further, since systems actors often engage in joint work between multiple public services, they need skills to navigate “micro politics” or “organizational politics” (Clarke et al. 2021, 3; Waring et al. 2023, 239). Skills can include diplomacy to manage routine culture clashes between professions, “deal making” to keep actors happy enough with the outcomes of negotiation and compromise, and informal ways of working (or organizing as a professional group) to challenge formal imbalances of power (Clarke et al. 2021, 5–10). For example, Jones and Fulop (2021) recount the mediating role of a “medical director,” including to act as a translator in inter-professional groups containing many ways to describe valuable evidence, engage in diplomacy to smooth relationships, and perform “repair work” when relationships break down across organizations. The payoff may be a level of conflict containment conducive to cooperation between some actors and muted opposition by others, to the extent that the conflict does not define the work to be done.

5. A Supportive architecture, culture, and environment to boost systems leadership

Reflecting on the wider context for supportive leadership is akin to seeing two sides of the same coin. Looking at one side, we see a need to encourage investment in training to boost the development of systems leadership capacity and promote systems change to boost the impact of new ways of thinking and working. This transition may be aided with a common focus, such as on a “place” or defined area around which many actors can collaborate, or a value such as fairness, equity, or justice that motivates people to invest their time and energy in change (Acosta, Madrigano, and Chandra 2021, 12–18; Atkinson et al. 2015).

A supportive “architecture” describes facilitation by design, such as to provide new incentives backed by the authority to reward new ways of working (O’Flynn et al, 2011, 248; Carey and Crammond 2015, 1022). For example, Talley and Hull (2023, 1041, citing Drath et al. 2008) describe the role of “direction” to establish a shared vision and means to achieve it, “alignment” to identify measures of progress (and anticipate tradeoffs between aims), and “commitment” to decisive action in the face of “overwhelming uncertainty.” A supportive “culture” involves the transition from a risk-averse and blaming culture toward a:

‘culture of learning, where risk-taking (within safe boundaries) is encouraged and where there is an acceptance that not all innovation will be successful ... staff feel confident in speaking out about errors, problems and uncertainties and feel empowered and supported to develop and implement ideas ... They also work more co-operatively and collaboratively ... in a climate characterised by cohesion, optimism and efficacy’ (West et al. 2017, 2)

Here, systems leadership skills are essential to include as many actors as possible, respect their ideas and perspectives, and give them the time and space to develop individual skills and collective ways of working (Hulks et al. 2017, 5–11; Koopmans et al. 2022, 3). For example, Onyx and Leonard (2011, 503–6) describe the impact of “community leadership” within a relatively informal and bottom-up culture of decision-making: leaders enjoy informal status or authority based on their knowledge and reputation in the community, and have the energy and skills to manage people and tasks with the consent of their peers.

Looking at the other side of this coin reveals a more challenging task: to engage with the current political system or policymaking environment that is not necessarily conducive to systems leadership (Figure 2). The long list of obstacles includes: a tendency for political leaders to pay lip service to the systems leadership lexicon without going much further, and a policymaking system that provides greater support for hierarchical forms of political control and accountability, to incentivize “short-termism and blame games” and reduce incentives and opportunities to “experiment and learn” (Cairney and Toomey 2025a, 21).

There may be general agreement that these challenges should be faced head-on: the barriers to systems leadership also provide its rationale (Figure 2). However, there is some debate on how influential systems leaders can be. For some, the potential rewards are profoundly high: if we can find the “leverage points” in a system, we can produce disproportionately large benefits from modest changes (Reinertsen, Bisognano, and Pugh 2008, 6, Hagel and Mortensen 2018, 6, inspired by Meadows 1999). For others, the main point is to stay humble in the face of a system beyond our understanding and control, and accept our role as collective, facilitative, and adaptive rather than powerful lever pullers (Bolden et al. 2023, 339, drawing on Stacey 2006, 30; Walker, Sillett, and Hussain 2022, 3). Indeed, a key point of a systems-inspired approach is to avoid falling into the trap of a heroic leadership narrative where a few people save the day against all odds.

6. Putting it all together: features of systems leadership

Our wider review of the literature uses these insights to identify “five features of systems leadership” as follows:

1. *Adopt a systems leadership mindset.* Reject heroic individualist leadership styles in favor of flexible and open-minded collaboration, focusing on the big picture, and co-producing a vision.
2. *Seek to understand wicked problems and complex policymaking systems.* Learn together about how wicked problems transcend traditional boundaries and seem to defy current solutions. Anticipate the emergent effects of complex policy mixes and the dynamics of policymaking systems.
3. *Bolster capacity.* Begin with the development of mindset and understanding, then move toward key tasks, such as to establish roles and responsibilities, nurture systems leadership attributes, and develop skills to facilitate action, broker agreement, and resolve conflict.
4. *Maintain a supportive architecture and culture.* Make the case for new ways of working, and new ways to evaluate progress. Produce then protect a common place-based or value-based vision, such as by providing the resources, time, and space to work collaboratively and creatively and build trust.
5. *Encourage continuous innovation and learning.* Wicked problems and systems dynamics are characterized by uncertainty about how systems work, and ambiguity about how to engage and address complex problems. Therefore, innovation and trial-and-error learning by many actors is key to a working understanding of a system (Cairney and Toomey 2025a, 26–27).

Examples of this overall approach abound in the systems leadership literature. Senge, Hamilton, and Kania (2015, 28–30) distill new leadership attributes into three elements, to help themselves and others: see the bigger picture, reflect on dialogue that invites multiple perspectives and views; and, collaborate to shift “from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future.” Ghate, Lewis, and Welbourn (2013a, 6–8) relate leadership qualities to “ways of ...: *feeling*, using personal values to drive motivation; *perceiving* the big picture; *hearing* diverse voices; *relating* to many other essential actors; *doing*, such as to stimulate discussion, facilitate cooperation, and enable others to take responsibility, and, *being*,” including brave, resilient, humble, and patient. The “CLEAR Framework for Leading Systems Change” exhorts us to: “Convene and commit” to stakeholder engagement; “Look and learn” about a system; “Engage and energize” to “build trust, commitment, innovation and collaboration”; “Act with accountability” while delivering on shared goals; and, “Review and revise” to reflect the need for “an agile, flexible, innovative and learning-centered approach” that welcomes “experimentation” (Dreier, Nabarro, and Nelson 2019, 4).

There is also some evidence of promising progress from case studies and testimonials. For example, Lichtenstein and Plowman (2009) draw on case studies where key actors were able to adapt to the dynamics of complex systems, such as to: encourage colleagues to anticipate future disruptions that might cause a “dis-equilibrium state,” harness the tendency for a system to “amplify actions” while unstable, such as to experiment and draw attention to new ideas, foster collective “sensemaking”

when identifying new and promising practices, and finally seek ways to stabilize the system by investing in new practices and discouraging additional pressure for change (2009, 620–625)

Further, the New Zealand government has incorporated elements of systems leadership into capacity development and approaches to public services reforms, often written up as case studies for learning (e.g. Barker 2016, 4; Inland Revenue 2021, 5). The Policy Project (2015, 3–8) explores how such skills might be distributed or shared in relation to staff roles to facilitate system-wide work, including to empower analysts to be creative and innovating without facing blame for failure, and develop “System Policy Capability” to address “cross-cutting, systemic and complex issues,” including to maintain cross-agency trust in the context of a historic competition to recruit key staff (see also Washington and Mintrom 2018).

7. Conclusion

Systems leaders are trusted actors who help many people to collaborate to address policy problems. Systems change is disruptive to the usual ways of thinking and acting, which means that systems leadership is difficult, contested, and often unrewarding. Therefore, systems leaders will be viewed by some as essential, but by others as part of a fad or a threat to their status and hard-won ways of working. Transformative change “makes many people feel uneasy” (Mintrom 2019, 320) and there is no prospect of a universally admired or heroic change agent to solve the world’s problems. In that context, this article is for people who are driven by the need to respond to wicked and often existential problems, seek transformative changes to policy and policymaking systems, and recognize the scale of the task.

It is difficult to know where to start, and how to think about such transformations. While the systems leadership literature does not provide a blueprint or toolbox for transformation, we were still able to distill a wealth of insights into guidance on the attributes to value, mindsets to encourage, and skills to develop with experience and training. This process begins with new ways of thinking about leadership and policymaking. Dispense with the idea that a few well-placed or heroic leaders can save the day, or that complex policy problems can be solved by one center of government. In fact, no individual or agency can even fully understand or come to singular agreement on the problems they face, or what will happen when they respond. Therefore, it is essential to not only focus on the bigger picture, but also find ways to harness the knowledge of many actors and many diverse perspectives. Then, your aim is to engage in meaningful collaboration across systems, to seek enough agreement on the long-term vision and how to get there, while acknowledging that you will need to be flexible and adaptive to change along the way.

This process requires a large, well-trained, competent, and tenacious or patient profession which combines multiple talents to contribute to collective action. These actors are humble, self-aware, reflective, and able to show empathy and compassion for others. They are open-minded, committed to seeing the big picture, and driven to collaborate, learn, and adapt to systems while supporting a widely-agreed moral purpose that is ambitious and tempered by reality. Profession-wide skills include for senior leaders to delegate tasks and enable shared action by actors across and outside of government, for brokers to facilitate boundary-spanning dialogue and action, and for diplomats to anticipate or seek to resolve conflict at multiple levels, from a high-level process to harness a collective vision to the routine disputes between organizations or professions. In other words, attention to systems leadership ideas should not be at the expense of political skills and a proper appreciation of policymaking in the real world.

Systems leadership also depends on a supportive context, including to design policy processes to provide new incentives to work differently, then align a new shared vision to measures of progress and a public service culture that rewards innovation and avoids blame games. These elements require consistent and high-level political support, to provide stable arrangements conducive to trust-driven cooperation, and give people enough optimism to expect collaborative approaches to translate into substantive action.

Of course, there is a major difference between this aspirational vision for systems leadership versus substantive and well-documented progress. For example, it is generally difficult to find a wider

supportive environment. Rather, the reason to seek systems leadership is also the explanation for limited progress: wicked problems endure and solutions remain contested, in a policymaking system that still prioritizes centralized power, top-down action and accountability, and maintains policy silos and turf wars, regardless of the recognition of this problem or commitment to change.

Therefore, the last element of systems leadership is to retain realistic optimism for the long term even if current progress seems limited. This optimism should be bolstered by a commitment to creativity and innovation, as well as clarity of purpose (connected to measures of progress), and the power of shared stories. Systems leaders need to help people not only to articulate the future they seek, and the means to get there, but also appreciate and learn from examples of success. Demonstrating the success of systems leadership as a process, and the outcomes of new ways of working, is essential to overcome skepticism or opposition from detractors and maintain morale among supporters. It helps advocates of systems leadership to redouble their efforts rather than give up in despair.

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